

# **Missed Opportunities and Misplaced Priorities: Congress Fails New Mexico's Families**

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New Mexico's families are facing serious challenges: rising health care costs, record gas prices, and climbing college costs -- all in the face of stagnant wages. They are worried about the direction of our country with no sign of success in the Iraqi war, and a sagging economy here at home. Instead of addressing these serious issues that directly affect America's families, the leadership of the 109th Congress has the wrong priorities and has missed vital opportunities to improve the lives of all Americans.

I have different values and priorities. My colleagues and I have put forward concrete steps that would significantly cut the costs of health care and cut the number of uninsured in half. I have joined efforts to give consumers relief at the gas pump. My colleagues and I have a plan to make a college education more affordable. We are fighting to make American businesses more competitive and to create better paying jobs here at home. We are working to take care of our troops when we send them into battle, and ensure they are appropriately honored when we bring them home. I want to give all Americans the tools they need to attain retirement security after a lifetime of hard work. And my colleagues and I are fighting to make sure that the American people are protected from terrorists, whether they are on a plane or on the subway.

## **Failing to Bring Down Health Care Costs and Reduce the Number of Uninsured**

Health care costs have been skyrocketing – burdening already-struggling middle class families. Since 2000, the cost of health insurance has risen by 59 percent. Furthermore, since January 2001, the number of Americans without health insurance has grown by 5.2 million – now reaching 45 million. And yet Congress has failed to do anything to cut health care costs or significantly reduce the number of uninsured. Instead, the leadership has worked to curb patients-rights, passing legislation to reduce rewards for patients seeking damages for injuries resulting from medical malpractice. This bill fails to do anything to cut health care costs and instead simply protects insurance companies and HMOs.

I am fighting to bring down health care costs and reduce the number of uninsured. Several bills have been introduced to bring down the cost of prescription drugs, which are a major factor in the rising costs of health care. These measures would promote competition by permitting the importation of drugs from Canada and other industrialized countries and give Medicare the authority to negotiate lower prescription drug prices on behalf of America's seniors. Further, I support several bills that would cut the number of uninsured in half. These bills are targeted to build on programs that already work and ensure that three fast-growing vulnerable segments of the uninsured have access to affordable health coverage: the low-income, the near-elderly, and small business employees.

## **Failing to Create Good-Paying Jobs and a Thriving Economy**

At a time of record trade deficits, the majority passed a bad trade bill that will cost America jobs and harm the U.S. economy, while failing to provide adequate protections for Central American workers. This will create a race to the bottom, instead of expanding markets and raising living standards. The majority has also rejected increasing the minimum wage, even though this would increase the paychecks of 7.5 million workers at a time of stagnating wages. Further, the leadership has created enormous budget deficits, along with a record trade deficit,

that threaten to increase interest rates and slow our economy. Finally, the majority has eliminated funding for small business 7(a) loans, even though small businesses are the backbone of the American economy.

I support a plan to improve our economy and help middle-class families. My colleagues and I want to make U.S. businesses more competitive and create better paying jobs here at home. Our plan for jobs and prosperity would support a more robust highway bill, support tax incentives to build the future economy, and end tax breaks that encourage companies to ship jobs overseas. We are also fighting to create hundreds of thousands of new jobs by investing in emerging, innovative energy technologies and in energy efficiency.

### **Failing to Ensure Veterans the Health Care They Need**

The majority's misplaced priorities are evidenced by their treatment of our nation's heroes – those who have defended our freedom and democracy. Time after time over the last two years, my colleagues and I have attempted to provide additional funding to meet our obligation to the growing number of returning veterans. Unfortunately these efforts have been defeated, with the Administration claiming the funding wasn't needed. Finally, on June 23rd, the Veterans' Affairs Department admitted that there was a \$1 billion shortfall for this year. After more than a month of pressure, the majority belatedly closed the funding gap for this year, but there is more to be done. There is also a huge shortfall in veterans' health care in the upcoming year.

In contrast, I am a cosponsor of the New GI Bill of Rights for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century that would improve benefits for our men and women in uniform today and provide long overdue benefits for the veterans and military retirees who have already served. The package would improve veterans' health care to meet the needs of our returning troops by increasing resources, bolstering mental health care for returning soldiers and blocking increases in prescription drug co-payments and enrollment fees for veterans. Further, it would provide better education and job training benefits for those who have answered the call, fully repeal the Disabled Veterans' Tax, and end the Military Families Tax for military retirees and the families of those who have died in the line of duty.

### **Failing to Improve Retirement Security**

As middle-class families are struggling to pay for exploding health care costs, higher gas prices at the pump, and rising college tuitions, saving for retirement has become a real challenge. Instead of working to improve retirement security for all Americans, many in the majority continues to support President Bush's Social Security privatization scheme. This risky scheme would replace Social Security's guaranteed benefit with a guaranteed gamble. At every town hall forum I have held on this topic, New Mexicans have resoundingly rejected this plan. Instead of abandoning privatization, the majority has now simply put their privatization scheme in new packaging. The "new" plan still diverts workers' payroll taxes into private accounts, still cuts benefits and still adds to the debt. This "new" plan has been introduced as a bill and could be part of legislation that the leadership brings to the Floor in September.

I am committed to strengthening Social Security by stopping privatization and a raid on the Social Security surplus, while providing middle-class families with the tools they need to achieve retirement security. My colleagues and I recently unveiled the AmeriSave Plan, which would expand and improve existing retirement accounts, such as 401(k)s and IRAs, so that American families can benefit from the power of compound interest while retaining Social Security's guaranteed benefit. Under this plan, nearly 100 million Americans would be eligible for the "AmeriSave Match," which would match dollar-for-dollar the first \$1,000 contributed to an IRA, 401(k), or similar retirement plan. The AmeriSave Plan would increase national savings and grow our economy while helping middle-class families prepare for a brighter future.

## **Failing to Adequately Protect Americans from Terrorism**

Throughout the last four years, the Bush Administration and Congressional majority have been significantly underfunding homeland security. As a result, many have pointed out that there are serious gaps in critical areas of homeland security – including first responder funding, border security, port security, chemical and nuclear plant security, rail security and transit security. For example, the tragic London terrorist bombings have highlighted the vulnerability of mass transit systems to terrorist attack. And yet, since 9/11, the Bush Administration has underinvested in improving transit security. Since 9/11, the federal government has allocated only \$250 million for transit security, while aviation security has received \$18.1 billion from the federal government. And yet, every day, 32 million people board mass transit, either going or coming from work – compared to fewer than 2 million people boarding planes everyday. The majority has also failed to keep the promises they made when they passed the 9/11 Act in December 2004 – for example, failing to fund the 2,000 new Border Patrol agents that were promised and failing to fund the 800 new immigration investigators that were promised.

In May, the majority voted against a comprehensive homeland security plan targeted at filling the gaps that still remain in first responder preparedness, border security, port security, chemical and nuclear plant security, and passenger security. For example, this plan includes \$2.8 billion over three years to improve the security of passenger transportation systems, including light rail, subways, buses, and commuter ferries, including funding for explosive detection equipment and surveillance and communication systems.

## **Failing to Bring Down the Costs of College**

One key concern of America's parents is that college tuition is skyrocketing and that college is becoming less and less affordable for America's families. Over the last three years, tuition at four-year public universities has skyrocketed by 38 percent and at private universities by 16 percent. And yet, the majority is actually proposing to increase the cost of going to college. Specifically, the majority is moving legislation (H.R. 609) that would raise student loan interest rates and block students from locking in low fixed interest rates on their college loans, meaning the typical student borrower would pay an additional \$6,000 on their college loans. This bill represents the largest cut in federal student financial aid in the 40-year history of these aid programs.

I support a plan to make a college education more affordable. It would expand access to college scholarships and increase Pell Grant scholarships by as much as \$1,000 per student, and make college loans significantly less expensive by lowering the interest rate cap on college loans and allowing students to choose a fixed or variable rate on their consolidation loans. Furthermore, the plan I support would provide incentives to public and private colleges to make tuition more affordable.